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BY STARK YOUNG

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WHEN we left Rimini we had no idea of seeing Florence. Miss Hutchinson's and my scheme was to do certain cities and towns, I to make the drawings, she to write what she called in her journalese the story. And Florence, as she said, had been sketched, painted, described, and recounted till it was black in the face; it was exactly the sort of subject we meant to avoid. There were plenty of other towns in Italy.

But it turned out after all that our best trains to the south would go by Florence and Chiusi. I begged my companion to let us stop off one day at least; there were reasons that made me want to revisit the convent at Fiesole once more before I died, if only for an afternoon. Well, she said, very well; I could have Florence this time, provided—did I remember the doctor in Molière who said if the other doctor would only agree to an emetic for this patient, he could give anything he liked to the next?—provided she was at liberty to stop wherever she chose after

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this. We were in Florence soon after noon, and later we took the tram that left the Duomo at four o'clock for Fiesole.

The little sister who met us at the door and was to be our guide through the convent had never seen me before, and I was glad of that. I was hoping not to see the mother superior again, but to make this visit like a stranger to the place. We saw first the chapel and then the fresco of Saint Jerome and his lion outside in the portico, where Cosimo di Medici's stair ascended from the road below. It was a stair with a high wall on one side; on the other a solid balustrade from which you looked down upon the valley where Florence lay and, beyond that, Samminiato and the line of hills. Up the stair, as it mounted, there were cypresses; there were two rows of them—on each step in the middle a cypress stood and one at the end near the balustrade; their shadows fell on the flagstones of the steps and on the wall, and the light under them was soft and quiet. Afterward we saw the cloister with the pots of coleus crowded on the low wall between the columns, and the arms of the Medici on the well-head, and after the

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cloister the court with the date-palms, the balcony where the nuns gather for recreation in the evening after dinner, and the long wall covered with yellow roses. Then we came to the garden, the geranium terrace, the cypress avenue below, the rondel with bay-trees and oleanders. The oleanders were in blossom and the whole place was sweet.

We came along the path to the olive-orchard, where a gate is and the statue of Saint Joseph. Under an olive-tree seats were arranged, where you could rest—two iron benches and some wicker chairs; and there the sister left us. It was time for benediction, she said, and we must excuse her. If we wished to come to benediction, or after benediction, we could go out by the stair; or, if we liked, there was the rose walk, half-way up the hill, to the gate on to the piazza; Cherubina would let us out.

We sat down and Miss Hutchinson lit a cigarette.

"Now tell me about your cousin," she said. "You promised you would, if we came here, though I generally hate stories about people's cousins; it tangles things up."

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I said: "About Rex?"

"Yes, who was here. That's the point, isn't it—he was here?"

"Yes, that's the point."

"But, see here, why's our Saint Joseph got a Phrygian cap? I just noticed it." She burst out laughing, and pointed gaily to the saint on his high pedestal. "Considering the Phrygian significance."

"It's Phrygian all right," I said, "but nobody'd know why. Look how quiet the statue looks in the shadow. It's in a poem Rex wrote: 'Thou art as alabaster filled with wine'——"

"To Saint Joseph, is that?" She was still gay over the Phrygian business; it involved her precious Freud.

"No," I said, "it's not Joseph; it's a love-poem."

"So? A love story! Then go on, *caro mio*, tell me about Rex." She settled her quick little body, like a lean bird, in her chair.

It was not so easy to do, I said, making Rex intelligible, but I would try.

The first time I saw this cousin was in the spring, in Texas, two years before the War broke

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out. I had been in New York all winter painting. They were baroque murals that I was doing, in the grand style, all the sumptuous curves, the rich variants on the circle, the magnificence of the baroque tradition in anatomy and architecture, fruits and flowers. I finished my commission in April, and all of a sudden, one day soon after, I knew that I wanted to be in another country. New York was all very well, but I wanted to see the light flooding down from a far, bright sky, to see white roads going off over the hills, stretches of white rocks and sharp, black greens, to see the morning in that world, the full, white noon, and then the breathless spring nights, with the starry mists and the tiers of bright, hard stars above that sad, sweet land.

I would go to Austin, already familiar to me, and walk about the country and paint. Miles of purple winecups and wild verbenas, the color of lilacs, would be in blossom; and the blue lupines would spread so thick in places that travellers on the train would ask if there were lakes.

"But if you are in Austin, you must meet

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your cousin Rex Drouillard," my aunt, who takes the family very seriously, wrote me from New Orleans. "His mother is here now for the winter with her brother, your cousin the doctor. Cousin Emma is the same as ever, still waltzing all night if she gets a chance." My aunt told me things I had heard all my life but might have forgotten about his mother and about Rex. And after all, too, she reminded me, his great-grandfather, Uncle Charles McGehee, was my great-grandfather's brother, which makes him kin. My cousin Emma McGehee had married Henry Drouillard, a gentleman much older than herself, and the head of a great Creole family in Louisiana. Till his death she was a leader in New Orleans society. But after he died the house was sold, for they had spent most of his money. Cousin Emma took Rex, who was about fifteen at the time, to Paris with her and spent whatever was left.

Mother and son were in Paris five years, which made Rex twenty when they came back to live with his uncle. For a while he tried tutoring in French, since he was by now more French than American, and spoke French better than

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he spoke English; but his manner toward the young ladies was such that fathers put an end to the lessons, and the tutoring was soon all over. And yet, my aunt observed, doubtless quite shrewdly, this would shortly have taken care of itself, if people could only have a little sense. Rex had not seemed so fiery to her, not as all that; she took his behavior to be really only a French notion he had, by which you consider it the manly thing to do, when you are left alone with a woman, to make love to her. However that might be, Rex had come to the university at Austin—the French professor there had been a friend of the family—and had burrowed his way into the classes, or had it burrowed for him by this family friend, and in two years had got himself graduated, just how God alone knew. He had supported himself by a little translating for the university library and by a monthly comic paper that he had established and that had not only paid expenses but made a profit; it had even begun to pay for contributions—people would have gladly donated their writings for the sheer pleasure of seeing themselves in print, but Rex as editor had

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a taste for doing things up in professional style—when the dean of the college heard too much of its Parisian note and closed it down.

The second year Rex had an assistantship not in French but, of all things, in political economy, which he won not so much through his study of the subject as of the professor, who was all temperament. Rex had written his mother an amusing letter about him, and how, from the time he heard him burst out at Christmas dinner on the love life of North American lizards, he knew he should get on with the economist—Cousin Emma had read the letter aloud one afternoon at a card-table, and all the family had given their opinion on the subject of its propriety. His mother tells me also, my aunt wrote, that there are several young ladies who are not perhaps in love with Rex but who seem to make him silk shirts and have him to suppers.

The first time I saw Rex he was sitting at his table naked with a gilt-paper crown on his head. He sat at the table writing, with the crown on his head and a towel round his loins. His room was in a sort of outhouse in a back corner

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of his landlady's yard. It was a two-room place with a porch running along in front, and had doubtless once been meant for the servants' quarters. By the porch there was a locust-tree in flower; the white blossoms were scattered on the floor of the porch and on the steps. It was early in the afternoon and the sun was blinding. The shade of the porch and the shade in the room were very distinct. The air was full of the drowsy sweet of the locusts.

We shook hands, and Rex, before he sat down again at his table, reached for some white cotton trousers and put them on. He had taken off the crown.

"I don't suppose you mind," he said, "but I'd better put some clothes on. I like to wear the crown sometimes, got it at a *bal poudré*." The simple explanation seemed to serve our purposes.

I took the only other chair to be seen. There was nothing else around but the white iron bed and the table; the room was bare as only a room in Texas can be. He was tall and blond, and spoke English rather precisely, like a foreigner, but had so much of a sort of half-laugh when

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he talked that he sounded careless or loose. You might set this little laugh of Rex's down as shy, or nervous, or silly, or as ironical, or as defensive. Whatever it was, it did not improve the impression he gave people.

"My mother writes to me about three times a year," he said, "and I write to her about three times. But she's broken the rule to tell me you were coming. She says you're a fine painter. She adores painting. Everybody in Paris painted her, you know. Immortal Helen and all that."

I said: "We'll pray at least that I'll be fine some day."

"You see while she is the painted swan I'm only a good man Friday to a college professor. These are his quizzes I'm reading. It's all rot, and I wouldn't do them if the course were mine. But he believes in it, so I'm doing it."

"Well, now that, I should say," Miss Hutchinson grumbled, interrupting me for the first time and beginning to turn the emerald round and round on her finger, as she did when about to be dubious, "sounds a little dutiful and tiresome."

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"Not at all," I said, "it's only using his imagination about the other man."

"My mistake. What did he say?"

"He said: 'But it gets me my six hundred bucks and I can live on that, the college year. Especially since, being a professorito now, I'm invited to all the dances instead of having to chip in. And I've gotten even a little by wearing my crown and getting the air on my skin. And gotten even this way too—' He reached over for a sheet of paper; it was a poem."

Miss Hutchinson crossed her legs.

"That's better," she said; "that's better. Did you see it?"

"'I'll give it to you,' Rex said; 'I've a carbon. I'm that efficient.' For that matter you could see by his eyes and hands that he could show efficiency enough in case he cared to bother. In his own affairs there were spurts of it, when it seemed worth while."

Miss Hutchinson turned and looked me in the eye.

"And tell me—was the poem good? How was it?"

I nodded. "I know it by heart," I said.

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"Well, then, say it for me."

I repeated the poem to her:

"Across the marble ledges of the dawn,
Rose-tinct and gold, like a Venetian's hair,
Day cometh now, and from the argent lawn
Of Paradise leans down upon the air.

And the white Artemis grows pale and fades,
She who with splendor drowns the unbosomed
 night,
Her twinkling flock asleep, folded in shades;
The larks are singing on the hills of light.

Waken, O lovely eyelids, waken slowly,
The dew on these green slopes trembles for thee;
This morn is one, but thou art all, and holy,
And holier with the dawns that are to be."

My companion heard the poem to the end
without moving.

"But look, *caro mio*, poetry's the only thing
I can stand rich. That's rich."

She could be very nice sometimes.

When the light had faded and I was
through with my painting, I used to drop in for
Rex and take him somewhere for supper—he
had no regular place. Afterward we walked in
the country. People along the road to Mount

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Bonnell used to see from their porches and little front yards two young men walking past, talking busily, one of them laughing a great deal, not very loud. Rex was not as strong as a horse, but he could walk, forever, as long a time as he could talk; he had the kind of endurance that women sometimes display; a mysterious vitality fed his slight body with some sort of deathless elixir.

One night, walking, we met some acquaintance of Rex's, who joined us and began to talk about his troubles. He was a solemn-looking young man, almost at the end of his college course, and he told us that he was trying to decide what he ought to do. He had seen a student cheating on examinations, looking at notes that he had hidden in his coat-pocket. Here we were with the honor system, he said, and under the honor system you were pledged not only to be straight yourself but to see that other men were straight. And yet he hated to report the chap, and get him expelled and all. What ought he do?

"Do you remember Jeanie Deans?" Rex said. The senior shook his head. "Well, anyhow

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she's a Scott heroine, and she wouldn't tell a lie even to save her sister from hanging. No, right was right, and Jeanie preferred an easy conscience for herself."

The student was silent, in consternation, I suppose, and walked along with his hand up before his mouth. I said: "Yes, but doesn't there come a point sometimes in your living, a point on whose rightness your whole existence afterward will depend?"

"My God, you're elaborate, darling!" Miss Hutchinson said, when I came to this.

"Well, how else can you say it? I mean a point where your decision goes down to your very elements."

"I get you, sweet. They're what people used to call crucial moments, morally, the sweet old things! What did Rex say?"

"He said: 'If your precious existence hangs on that moment, well, let it hang.'

"'Like Jeanie's sister,' I said."

That was about all the religion Rex had. From his careless prattling you gathered at length perhaps that he saw life as a flux. Something on the whole pathetic, something set in

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darkness. Filled with little bodies of men who were confused, warm-hearted, transitory, and touching. You can give others whatever good or daring or brief audacity you have in you to give; for yourself, meantime, you can admit life's beauty and fatalism. He was a sort of voluptuous mystic.

"And the soul?" my companion asked.

"I fancy he never thought he had one."

"Whew! I'm damned devout myself. I wouldn't risk it," she said.

I said: "I don't suppose the notion of a risk of any kind was very clear to Rex."

"Well, what I'd like to know is where he thought he was headed."

"There, I suppose, he did variations on Einstein."

"Space all bent up?"

"Yes, and thought that the shortest distance between two points was in himself."

"That's a whang of a thought. But I don't skip around concerning my little soul."

"Perhaps Rex had his mother's feet in his brain."

She made no answer to that, thinking perhaps of her soul, which she must have risked plenty

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of times; and I said nothing more. We sat following our own private thoughts.

"Obviously there's one other department," my friend observed presently.

"You mean love? He was shy about it. He spoke of it once. Not anybody there in Austin, not the loyal shirt-makers he lounged around with. I met one of them; she overdid the comrade note so that I wondered. But I never wondered about Rex. He was in love with a girl he had met on the steamer coming home the year before. Sometimes he wrote to her and she to him, but not regularly. They were both in love with one another. I don't know any more."

She complained of the poor data I offered her, and I continued:

After all, I said, I was in Texas for only a fortnight or three weeks at the most. Then that next autumn the War broke out and in a month Rex had left Texas and was on his way to enlist for France. I did not see him, but I had a letter from the boat, mailed at Cherbourg. He was on his way to Paris, he said, and was sorry not to have seen me; but a week in New York was so short. The rest was about seeing

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the girl again during that week before he sailed. I could see he had to talk of what he felt. All of it was about love. But the way he said it was satirical. All of it satirical, which was like him.

I heard nothing else from Rex, either at that time or later, when I was in camp, and then five years afterward he wrote me from Fiesole here. The letter was not very long. He had been gassed in the Argonne and his lungs were not so good. He was here at the convent rather indefinitely. The sisters nursed him; they were like mothers and saints. He had never seen goodness like that. He enclosed a poem he had written. I might like it. That was about all.

My companion threw away a cigarette that had gone out.

"And what about the woman?" she asked—"that he loved."

"Nothing."

"Not a word?"

"No, I don't even know her name."

She thought a while. Then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Well, after all, he was your friend, not mine."

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I had answered the letter in good time, and then, after two months, my letter had been returned to me with a note from the mother superior informing me that Rex was dead. He had died the 24th of April.

That summer, when I was in Italy, I went to Fiesole to the convent to ask about Rex and to thank the nuns for their kindness. They were nearly all English and Irish sisters, and had made their convent into a sort of home for convalescents.

Mother Theresa seemed glad to see me; we sat down in her little drawing-room and she told me about Rex. He was a good young man, a kind heart; always in her prayers she had said: "God bless him and keep him what he is." He was considerate of the sisters' feelings, but he was not religious. He used to say that the sisters were holiest when they knelt in benediction, because then their veils hung in the best lines, and they were most human when they gathered on their balcony for their recreation, the half-hour allowed them after dinner, laughing and chattering and noisy like birds. He used to pit the saints in the garden against one an-

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other. He would come in and say that Saint Joseph was furious because the Madonna got all the flowers. He would say: "Saint Anthony is pouting this morning; he thinks Saint Joseph has had too much attention." That made the sisters laugh heartily and shake their fingers at him for his wickedness, but he only laughed the way he always did—that sort of little half-laugh.

Mother Theresa herself was grieved that he was not religious, but especially so since he was not going to live; the doctor said he would not last much longer; it was his lungs, from that dreadful war. Where could the poor young man's mother have been, leaving him over here alone like that? "His mother," thought I, "was dancing in Louisiana"; but I said only: "She doubtless had no idea he was sick; he hadn't told her."

The sisters made prayers for him, the reverend mother went on, but of course they said nothing of that to him, not liking to intrude. Then, when you could see he was not going to live much longer, Mother Theresa thought she herself must speak to him a little. "Has the doc-

tor been telling you how you are, dear?" she asked then; that was what she said. And Mr. Drouillard said: "You mean, has he told you I'm going to die?" "Yes," she said; "God help us." "And so, mother, you think I'll be damned?" he said. And she said: "Only God can know what is in our hearts. You must pray." "No," he said, "you make the sisters pray for me—Sister Stanislaus, Sister Gonzaga, Sister Agnes, Sister Anastasia; tell them, if they'll pray for me, I'll bring them some Turkish paste, when I'm well again, from Gilli's, to eat at recreation—that's an idea—Turkish paste for nuns!" He was smiling, but had not taken his eyes off Mother Theresa's face. No one would forget his eyes.

The next evening, after benediction, when the convent guests were at dinner and Sister Agnes came to rub his arms for neuritis, he sent her for Mother Theresa, and when they came in he called them to the bed and told them that he had been thinking of religion and that he believed at last. How their hearts leapt for joy! Mother Theresa hurried the sister off to catch the priest before he should have left the sacristy. He came and was there for a long

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time talking with the poor young man, leaning down to hear. Then he baptized him, and said the prayer *Absolve, quaesumus, Domine*, and gave him the sacrament. Sister Agnes, who had lost control of herself, knelt at the foot of the bed crying and thanking God. In the night he died. It seemed a beautiful thing in God to grant them this blessing, that he died in the church.

When I stopped, Miss Hutchinson went on smoking in silence for some time; then she threw down her cigarette on the gravel and put her heel on it.

"That's all," I said.

She began turning her ring round and round.

"That taste for paper crowns he had—that's what I'm thinking."

I did not argue the point.

"Poor devil!"

"Look," I said, "you see the lights coming on there toward Santa Croce; it will soon be night; let's go up to Mother Edith's parlor. It's the ring of cypresses there just under the brothers' wall."

We rose and passing through the gate began

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to ascend the path up the hill. It wound along among the olives and fruit-trees, and the vines, grown as they were in Virgil's day in festoons between clipped elms. At last there was a broader path, an incline that led into an open space. Cypressess bordered this path, and stood in a ring about the open, and climbed on up the slope to the rock cliffs below the wood of San Francesco. On the ground among the straight trunks the late golden light spread in long rays. You could see the Virgin's shrine against the rock, the dark ivy leaves about it. The edges of the leaves were shining. Under a cypress at the side of the path I saw a red-purple iris standing up from the stones; there was the white ground, the dark tree, the purple flower—the elegiac, passionate beauty.

We stood there looking down over the fading valley, and Florence and the hills.

"He's too much for me," Miss Hutchinson said presently; "I mean putting him together. You can usually get a sort of outline of any creature, and sort of fill it in. But this beats me."

I said nothing, but lit another cigarette. She spoke again, to herself mostly.

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"So he said he was converted, to make these people happy, these nuns! They'll talk about it the rest of their lives."

At last, when I had only nodded my head and still had said nothing, she turned to me. "Well, then, what about that second poem? Was it the one with the alabaster?"

"Yes," I said.

"Can you quote it too? You knew all of the other one."

"I can if you like."

"I'd like to hear it; say it."

I said Rex's poem:

"Thou art as alabaster filled with wine,
Wherein the sun of summer shineth through,
Tinged with the sound of bees when the rich
vine
Shakes down its garlands in the diamond dew.

Thou art a gleaming saint amid the trees,
Whereon the holy moonlight lieth white,
In some old garden where the centuries
Trail their dark mantles in the silent night.

And songs of lips dead long ago I hear,
Of them whose holy dreams were fraught with
pain,
And if I have or have thee not, it were,
O Saint and Shrine, O Life in Life, in vain!"

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Miss Hutchinson waited for me to finish, then turned on me.

"But I thought you said he didn't mention the woman he loved?"

"He didn't."

"Well, what else do you think he meant by all that poem? Not that it would change matters any; look how this last poem declines from the first; it would have been the same whether this love-affair turned out well or turned out badly. All in vain anyhow, as he says. With a man like that."

"If you mean Rex was shallow, futile," I said, "I'd say no; he was deep enough—he just had no anchor."

"Well, what's the difference?" she said.

"All the difference. He gave me a lot."

"Oh, yes, and the nuns a lot."

"And, besides, I'd say Rex's story is not a love-story."

"You men are funny."

She turned away from me and stood there leaning against one of the trees, looking down at Florence, as if she were alone.

In the stillness I could hear far down in the

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valley a stream running, and above the cypresses the first stars had come out. Presently the night would deepen, the nightingales in the laurels down the slope would begin to sing, and the sky be thick with stars. I was thinking of Rex and what he may have thought of their splendor and certainty.

But I said only, "It's time we started," and we said nothing more till we came to the convent gate and out into the piazza.